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The Edinburgh Legal History Blog

Arniston House and its Libraries

Posted on [February 12, 2013](#) by [Karen Baston](#)

Arniston House is the home of the Dundases of Arniston. This family produced some of the most important lawyers of the eighteenth century including judges, two Lord Presidents of the Court of Session and a Chief Baron of the Exchequer. Arniston House has had an interesting architectural history as it evolved from a medieval defensive tower house to an elegant Palladian mansion with Victorian additions.

This Occasional Blogger recently jumped at the chance to visit Arniston House as part of a private tour organised by the Georgian House Education Committee for National Trust for Scotland volunteers based at the [Georgian House](#) in Edinburgh. The highlight for me was always going to be being in William Adam's upper floor library which was created between 1726 and 1732 as Adam built the House for Robert Dundas (1685-1753), later the family's first Lord President. This remarkable room retains its original book shelves – although their colour has changed from their original white to a light hued wood grain effect – and the terracotta portrait busts bought by another Robert Dundas, the future second Lord President while he was travelling on the Continent in the 1730s. The library and its design were clearly on his mind as he travelled. The travelling Dundases would have bought books abroad. Both Lord Presidents studied law at Utrecht as part of the well-known temporary migration of Scottish legal scholars between the 1680s and 1750s. It is conceivable that father's books needed a home and that both father and son knew that their family library would grow more over time. The Adam library allowed for a growing collection of books to be assembled and housed.

The Adam library at Arniston is an example of one of the two main types of Scottish country house libraries built in the eighteenth century. Libraries were usually built in pavilions attached to the main block as found at Newhailes near Edinburgh which is earlier in date or in the upper floors of the main body of the house. This later type is descriptively called a 'skied' library. Both types of plan allowed the users of the library to be away from the activities and noise of their households while they worked, studied, and welcomed fellow professionals and scholars to their sanctuaries.

The Arniston library features large windows that face north towards Edinburgh, a carved chimneypiece, and elegant plasterwork by Joseph Enzer (who also created the house's impressive entry hall).

The library shelves hold a fine collection of china and glass now. The books were moved to a new ground floor library in the late 1860s when a later Robert Dundas decided that the skied library was too inconvenient. He converted room off the main entry hall into a library and study complete with a neo Jacobean fireplace and secret door leading to the east pavilion of the house. Dundas was a bibliophile like his ancestors so, although he did some weeding, most of the collection is intact in its new location. The impressively displayed collection holds legal works, history, and literature.

The rest of the house also contains items of interest to the legal historian including portraits by leading artists such as Raeburn and Ramsay of members of the Dundas legal dynasty.

A visit to Arniston House is highly recommended. See www.arniston-house.co.uk where you can find details about opening times and prices for 2013. Entry is by guided tour at set times or in pre-booked groups only since the house is still very much a family home.

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